

The 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance: Implications for Air Force Special Operations

by

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Abstract

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The January 2012 release of “Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense” by Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta significantly changed America’s strategic direction. This paper examines the implications of America’s change in strategic direction on Air Force special operations. By reviewing the new Defense Strategic Guidance and the United States Special Operations Command’s Posture Statement, the author distills five implications for Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC). In addition to facing Anti-Access/Area Denial challenges over the coming years, AFSOC is likely to be more heavily engaged in building partner capacity missions; be more forward deployed to the Asia-Pacific region; face an increased operations tempo; and be forced to negotiate complicated budgetary challenges. After examining AFSOC’s Way Ahead briefing, the author concludes with two recommendations: AFSOC should increase rotational force deployments to the Asia-Pacific and accelerate development of the next generation SOF mobility aircraft.

The 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance: Implications for Air Force Special Operations

The concept that the central threat for the foreseeable future will be of an irregular nature has been recognized . . . in the 2008 National Military Strategy and has subsequently been embraced by AFSOC

-Lieutenant General Donald Wurster¹

Introduction

Lieutenant General Donald Wurster, commander of the Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC), authored an article in *Joint Force Quarterly* in 2010 in which he described current and future challenges facing his command. As illustrated by the epigraph, Lieutenant General Wurster focused and prepared his command to support the nation in countering irregular challenges. The general suggested, “[t]omorrow’s security challenge will likely have less focus on nation-state peer competitor conflict” and more emphasis on “issues at the subnational level.”² Lieutenant General Wurster aligned his command vision with the nation’s strategic direction at the time; that strategic direction, however, would change over the next two years. The January 2012 release of *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense* by Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta significantly changed America’s strategic direction.

Purpose

This paper examines the implications of America’s change in strategic direction on Air Force special operations. Concern regarding AFSOC’s organizational agility served as motivation for this study. This paper will attempt to highlight areas where AFSOC’s posture is misaligned with the demands of the 2012 Defense Strategic

Guidance (DSG)—a term that will be used throughout as a reference to *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*.

Methodology

This paper is organized into five major sections. Upon completion of the introduction, the author will review the DSG and the associated United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) posture statement. That review will be used to distill five implications for AFSOC. The author will then examine AFSOC's current approach toward negotiating the challenges associated with those implications. The paper will conclude with the presentation of two recommendations for AFSOC to consider as it looks to the future.

America's New Strategic Direction

The 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance

President Obama, Secretary Panetta, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff revealed the DSG at a press conference in the Pentagon on January 5, 2012. The guidance followed a comprehensive defense review initiated by President Obama in response to the "winding down" of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the "rising threat from China and Iran," and the "fiscal crisis demanding hundreds of billions of dollars in Pentagon budget cuts."³ During press conference remarks, the President stated the new strategy provides "well-defined goals", clarifies America's "strategic interests in a fast-changing world," and guides "our defense priorities and spending over the coming decade."⁴

In the preface to *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership*, President Obama identifies the need to "focus on a broader range of challenges and opportunities, including the security and prosperity of the Asia Pacific."⁵ Secretary Panetta asserts the US is "at a strategic turning point" and reaffirms the notion the Joint Force "will have a global

presence emphasizing the Asia-Pacific.”⁶ In implementing the DSG, Pentagon officials established the priority of maintaining the vitality of America’s special operations forces (SOF).⁷ Whereas the DSG compels the majority of the Department of Defense to shift from “an emphasis on today’s wars to preparing for future challenges,” SOF must be able to do both simultaneously—prevail in “today’s wars” while adequately preparing for the future.⁸ In response to the publication of the DSG, Admiral William McRaven, commander of USSOCOM, appeared before the Senate Armed Services Committee on March 6, 2012, to present his posture statement for SOF support of the new strategic guidance.

USSOCOM Posture Statement

In his statement before Congress, Admiral McRaven reassured members that SOF are “well-suited to respond” to the “rapidly changing environment” described in the DSG.⁹ He suggested his command will “remain engaged against violent extremist networks for the foreseeable future” during which SOF’s core capability of direct action will be required as a means for disrupting those threats.¹⁰ He made it a point of emphasis, however, to assert the importance of the indirect approach as a necessary complement to direct action.

Admiral McRaven stressed SOF’s indirect approach as a “complementary element that can counter the systemic components of the threat” posed by violent extremist organizations.¹¹ A characteristic of this approach includes host nation engagement and empowerment. By amplifying partner capabilities and creating a network of relationships, “SOF can provide a hedge against strategic surprise by identifying and working preemptively to address problems before they become conflicts.”¹² The indirect approach builds the defense capacity of partner nations and

establishes a relationship of trust and confidence. SOF's indirect approach supports Secretary Panetta's direction to achieve "forward and persistent engagement of key countries."¹³ Admiral McRaven reported his command conducts forward engagements in over 100 countries each year.¹⁴ He touted the success of USSOCOM's Military Information Support Teams (MISTs), Regional Information Support Teams (RISTs), and civil-military support elements (CMSEs) as additional examples of the successful use of the indirect approach. The current employment of 22 MISTs, 4 RISTs, and 17 CMSEs enhance diplomacy and development efforts by coordinating the whole of government approach.¹⁵ He used SOF operations in Afghanistan as an example of the mutually supportive nature of the direct and indirect approaches.

Admiral McRaven predicts "increasing requirements for SOF" in Afghanistan due to their "unique ability to simultaneously blend direct and indirect approaches."¹⁶ SOF currently comprise eight percent of American forces in the country, but he expects their overall numbers and contributions to "increase by some small amount" as conventional forces draw down through 2014.¹⁷ Of note, Admiral McRaven touts the success of the SOF-run Village Stability Operations/Afghan Local Police initiatives and the ongoing counterterrorism effort as examples of a productive blend of direct and indirect approaches. Exemplifying the indirect approach, SOF have recruited and trained 11,000 members of the Afghan police forces throughout 57 districts; success in this effort has enabled better "governance, development, and security at the village level."¹⁸ But the direct approach is needed as well. American SOF partner with Afghan forces to execute direct action counterterrorist missions; according to the admiral, these missions are "making significant progress" toward achieving stability and security within

Afghanistan.¹⁹ Because of their success and the drawdown of conventional forces, the American SOF commitment in Afghanistan will most likely grow over the coming years.

High SOF operations tempo in Afghanistan coupled with expanding requirements in other geographic Areas of Responsibility suggests the overall stress on the USSOCOM force will increase. Illustrating USSOCOM's future operations tempo, Admiral McRaven states there will be a "constant demand for a 'steady state' deployed force of nearly 12,000 SOF to support the GCCs' [Geographic Combatant Commanders'] requirements."²⁰ In response to the demanding operations tempo, Admiral McRaven commissioned a "Preservation of the Force and Families Task Force."²¹ The task force will take action to increase predictability and improve resiliency within USSOCOM components. These efforts aim to improve three things: retention within the ranks; well-being of service members and their families; and, most importantly, the readiness of America's SOF forces to conquer the challenges confronting 21st century defense. Increased operations tempo, the SOF-centric drawdown in Afghanistan, and additional requirements resulting from increased reliance on indirect approaches produce several implications for AFSOC as America pursues its new strategic direction.

Implications for Air Force Special Operations

Our nation's new strategic direction, as described in the previous section, will shape the future of AFSOC over the course of the coming years. By reviewing the DSG and USSOCOM posture statement, the author distilled five implications for the future of AFSOC—Air Force Special Operations Forces (AFSOF) are more likely to: engage in building partner capacity missions; deploy more frequently to the Asia-Pacific region; face an increased operations tempo; negotiate complicated budgetary challenges; and

operate within an Anti-Access/Area Denial environment. Before discussing these five implications, however, the author will first provide a brief description of AFSOC as a means of introduction.

Air Force Special Operations Command

AFSOC, one of ten major United States Air Force (USAF) commands, was established in 1990.²² Its mission is to “[c]onduct global special operations missions ranging from precision application of firepower to infiltration, aviation foreign internal defense, exfiltration, resupply, and refueling of SOF operational elements.”²³ AFSOC consists of approximately 16,000 people organized within one Number Air Force, three active duty wings, two overseas groups, one training center, one Air National Guard wing, and one Air Force Reserve wing.²⁴ Airmen within the command are trained to employ a variety of specially modified aircraft including C-130 variants used to perform the precision strike and SOF mobility missions, CV-22 tilt rotor aircraft for SOF mobility, and the MQ-1/9 unmanned aerial vehicles that execute intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) missions. With headquarters at Hurlburt Field, Florida, AFSOC serves as the Air Force component of USSOCOM.²⁵ AFSOC’s commander, Lieutenant General Eric Fiel, reports to Admiral McRaven and must, therefore, ensure alignment with USSOCOM’s posture statement. This paper will now present implications associated with the DSG in order to later provide an assessment of AFSOC’s alignment. The first implication to be discussed is an increased demand for forward engagement.

Increased Building Partner Capacity Missions

As part of the call for increased forward engagement, AFSOC should expect to face additional tasking for aviation foreign internal defense (AvFID) and building partner (and partnership) capacity (BPC) missions. The 2012 defense strategic guidance “sets

the tone for the role of building partnership capacity going forward.”²⁶ In the document’s preface, President Obama cites the Libya campaign of 2011 in calling for the creation of “new opportunities for burden-sharing.”²⁷ Secretary Panetta’s desire for “military-to-military cooperation to address instability and reduce the demand for significant U.S. force commitments” coupled with Admiral McRaven’s emphasis on the indirect approach suggest AFSOC should be prepared to support frequent forward engagements and have the capacity to conduct increased BPC mission tasking.²⁸

Former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates provides a simple definition for BPC—“helping other countries defend themselves or, if necessary, fight alongside U.S. forces by providing them with equipment, training, or other forms of security assistance.”²⁹ Throughout its existence, USSOCOM has been charged with building the military and security capacity of our nation’s partners. Indeed, the command describes this activity as one of its core operations.³⁰ Furthermore, three of SOF’s eleven specified missions “directly support” BPC efforts.³¹ Foreign Internal Defense (FID) is one of those specified missions. A recent US Army War College research paper provides an easily understandable definition of FID—“training and equipping host-nation military” forces “to promote stability and liaisons.”³² Within AFSOC, it is the mission of the 6th Special Operations Squadron (SOS) to conduct FID.

The 6th SOS is the primary unit within AFSOC responsible for conducting BPC operations. The squadron’s mission is “to assess, train, advise and assist foreign aviation forces in airpower employment, sustainment and force integration.”³³ Airmen in the squadron are regionally oriented and proficient in a variety of foreign languages; they come from 32 career fields and undergo an extensive assessment, selection, and

training regimen before they graduate as air advisors.³⁴ Organized into theater-oriented operational detachments, air advisors' primary objective is "facilitating the availability, reliability, safety, and interoperability of participating foreign aviation resources supporting joint and combined operations."³⁵ As one of only three squadrons in the USAF that perform the air advisory mission, members of the 6th SOS provide a significant contribution to our nation's ongoing BPC efforts in the air domain.³⁶

According to a 2008 report from the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA), "Airpower is a major source of American advantage in foreign internal defense."³⁷ Despite its importance, AFSOC is only one of two major commands in the USAF specifically tasked to conduct AvFID.³⁸ Even without the renewed focus on BPC provided by the DSG, the supply of AvFID could not meet the latent demand. The CSBA report concludes, "at least 58 percent of the formal requests for forces received by the squadron [6th SOS] were unsupportable, primarily owing to a lack of manpower, and hundreds of additional informal requests were not met."³⁹ Efforts are ongoing to double the personnel numbers in an attempt to increase capacity, but the CSBA report asserts "as much as five times" the current capacity could be required to meet estimated demand.⁴⁰ In order to meet the intent of the DSG, AFSOC should recalibrate and redirect its current capacity for AvFID.

The most recent publically available unclassified data claims there was a "notable increase in the number of 6th SOS missions in Central Asia (in the CENTCOM area of responsibility) and Africa" over the six-year period from 2001 through 2007.⁴¹ This increase came at the expense of other regions. Only four of the 31 countries in which the 6th SOS performed advisory missions were in the Pacific Command's AOR;

the mission advisory roles in the Pacific were further limited to rotary wing aircraft training, medical engagements, and night vision goggle training.⁴² The limited nature of this engagement seems inconsistent with America's new strategic direction. Given limited personnel and fiscal resources, there needs to be redirection of the AvFID effort towards the Asia-Pacific.

Increased Engagement in the Asia-Pacific

The DSG unequivocally calls for rebalancing America's strategic focus to the Asia-Pacific region. Re-emphasizing the region, the strategy is "intended to offer more than just increased force levels and rhetoric," according to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey.⁴³ The strategy will require "more personnel for military-to-military engagements to strengthen existing relationships and build trust among emerging partners in the region."⁴⁴ A Congressional Research Service report on the DSG suggests one purpose for the "pivot" is to "deepen U.S. credibility in the region at a time of fiscal constraint."⁴⁵ The renewed focus also underscores President Obama's belief that "the center of gravity for U.S. foreign policy, national security, and economic interests is shifting towards Asia, and that U.S. strategy and priorities need to be adjusted accordingly."⁴⁶ In contrast to the President's assertion, the bulk of AFSOC's force lay down and forward presence is in regions other than the Asia-Pacific.

AFSOC has one group permanently based in the Asia-Pacific. It is the 353rd Special Operations Group (SOG) at Kadena Air Base on Okinawa, Japan. The group has three operational squadrons—two flying squadrons and one special tactics squadron; other units within the group support the operations of these three squadrons. AFSOC units also comprise the aviation arm of the Joint Special Operations Task Force Philippines (JSOTF-P) on a rotational basis. Detachments from AFSOC's CONUS-

based ISR, intra-theater airlift, and AvFID squadrons, along with elements from the 353rd SOG, support the JSOTF-P. In citing the success of the JSOTF-P, General Dempsey suggests joint task forces that “work through local partners” and that are “committed over time” will be an integral part of future Pacific engagements.⁴⁷ Additional future deployments in the region will require “increased flexibility” and “will be smaller, more agile, expeditionary, self-sustaining, and self-contained.”⁴⁸ AFSOC’s units and their airmen fit these specifications to a high degree and should expect to be called upon more often to advance America’s strategy in the Pacific.

SOF’s unique characteristics mean its units will play central roles during our nation’s future Pacific engagement. Due to its unique roles and missions, SOF serves a bridging function between other US agencies, connecting divergent interests spanning the spectrum from covert operations and the development of intelligence assets (Central Intelligence Agency) to overt diplomacy, development, and aid (Department of State/USAID).⁴⁹ This SOF characteristic will be a key enabler since the new strategic direction itself relies on a “much more integrated approach to the region, in which the various tools of power and influence are utilized in a more deliberate and coherent fashion.”⁵⁰ Reflecting the challenges facing our nation in the Asia-Pacific, “SOF will need to shift from an episodic deployment force to a persistent-presence force—with more forces forward, in more places, for longer periods of time.”⁵¹ AFSOC, therefore, should be prepared to conduct more operations in the Asia-Pacific as SOF presence in that region becomes more pervasive. As SOF becomes the force of choice for our nation to establish smaller footprints at relatively lower costs, AFSOC should expect to increase its already high operations tempo.

Increased Stress on the Force

America's strategic reorientation necessarily means renewed emphasis in the Asia-Pacific will come with increased strain until the SOF mission ends in Afghanistan. Given that 85 percent of SOF's forward deployed forces are in the Central Command's area of responsibility (SOF's commitment in Afghanistan underwrites President Obama's accelerated drawdown of conventional forces), it seems likely that AFSOC's operations tempo will increase as it is "strained by simultaneous demands in both regions."⁵² Professional and academic assessments predict the operations tempo of SOF units will increase as the Department of Defense continues to implement the DSG.

A June 2012 Congressional Research Service report concludes the "reliance on smaller teams operating in innovative ways . . . suggests an expanded role for U.S. SOF"; coupled with the availability of fewer conventional forces, "U.S. SOF might find its operational tempo increased."⁵³ A senior fellow at Stanford's Hoover Institution, Thomas Henriksen predicts, "[t]he various skills of the special operators will be in even greater demand" as combat operations wind down in Afghanistan and as "regional four-star commanders" become more "eager for the capability that only special units can provide."⁵⁴ Similarly, a Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) review of the DSG suggests, "as a result of increased demand for SOF, a high operational tempo may place increased pressure on these already-stressed units."⁵⁵

Increased operations tempo will result in increased stress on the force—on both AFSOC's people and its equipment. Increased wear and tear on equipment affects readiness, particularly in AFSOC where Vietnam-era airframes continue to serve within its C-130 fleet. In a 2010 briefing, General Wurster revealed that increased combat and contingency operations since 2001 resulted in a 56% increase in the number of hours of

unscheduled maintenance for the MC-130 fleet.⁵⁶ From a personnel readiness perspective, Admiral McRaven reports that high operations tempo is “atrophy[ing] some of our skills.”⁵⁷ Personnel readiness serves a crucial foundation for mission readiness. As deployments increase, personnel readiness becomes more of a challenge within AFSOC’s ranks—relationships fail, medical conditions become debilitating, and retention becomes difficult. Instead of offering a respite from these challenges, it is likely the DSG will continue to increase stress on AFSOC’s force. To mitigate the effects on personnel and mission readiness, AFSOC should expect to expend additional fiscal resources on boosting personal resiliency and equipment life-cycle longevity.

Budgetary Concerns

Promoting resiliency in its all-volunteer force is one area that will require additional resources if the AFSOC operations tempo continues to remain high. Admiral McRaven, however, seems to stand firmly behind such initiatives even in this era of fierce resource competition. Resiliency efforts will come at the expense of other DOD programs as the military implements \$487 billion in budget cuts over the next decade. According to Secretary Panetta, one of the main purposes of the DSG is to “help shape the force of the 21st century . . . even in an era of constrained resources.”⁵⁸ In his speech at the National Press Club, Secretary Panetta said that he and military leaders want to avoid “across-the-board cuts that hollowed out the force and weakened our military” during past drawdowns.⁵⁹ Impending cuts will be substantial but targeted, influencing the relationship between the services, USSOCOM, and component commands such as AFSOC.

Even with the Budget Control Act and its associated cuts, Admiral McRaven projects SOF to grow 3-5% each year through FY 2017.⁶⁰ In many ways, this growth is

necessary to implement the DSG that seems to rely on SOF more heavily and in order to “reap a high rate of return” on the significant financial investment the nation has already made in SOF over the last decade (USSOCOM’s budget has tripled since 2001).⁶¹ Nevertheless, while USSOCOM grows, the services will decline—the Marines Corps by 20,000 personnel and the Army by 80,000 soldiers.⁶² A recent report from CSIS suggests that “behind closed doors SOF may find relations with the services increasingly strained” as the “services, under their own budget pressures, will likely demand that USSOCOM rely more on its SOF-specific funding source (MFP-11) and less on money directly from the military branches.”⁶³

USSOCOM has “service-like” responsibilities because it has its own checkbook and accompanying authority over SOF force structure and equipment.⁶⁴ It has its own Major Force Program (MFP-11) through which it develops “SOF specific” and “SOF peculiar” equipment. USSOCOM relies on the services to fund “service common capabilities”.⁶⁵ To illustrate this relationship, consider the MC-130 aircraft: USSOCOM relies on the USAF to buy the basic C-130 airframe under MFP-4, but then modifies it to the MC-130 standard using MFP-11 funds. Shrinking service budgets will likely strain this funding and acquisition arrangement. Shrinking service budgets will also affect AFSOC in other ways besides in acquisitions and the funding of new equipment.

USSOCOM and its component commands rely significantly on conventional forces as key enablers for their operations. Enabling capabilities include communications, security, logistics, medical, mobility, and intelligence.⁶⁶ The former commander of USSOCOM, Admiral Eric T. Olsen, stressed the importance of this support to SOF operations in saying the “nonavailability of these force enablers has

become the most vexing issue in the current operational environment, especially in view of the responsible general-purpose forces drawdown.”⁶⁷ When forward deployed over a prolonged period, AFSOC substantially relies on such conventional support; conventional force cutbacks, therefore, will negatively affect AFSOC’s ability to project and sustain its forces in future forward engagement scenarios. To drive home the point, a CSIS report asserts that as personnel numbers shrink within the services, “fewer conventional units could reduce SOF’s ability to conduct the range and depth of missions required in the new strategy”⁶⁸

Anti-Access/Area Denial Challenges

The DSG clearly states our nation’s military must be prepared to conduct future operations against adversaries possessing Anti-Access and Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities. While there are undoubtedly others, China and Iran are specific examples of nations that possess such capabilities. In the words of Secretary Panetta, we need to “ensure our ability to project power in areas where our enemies seek to deny us access.”⁶⁹ Using the examples above, the Strait of Hormuz and the Taiwan Straits are two areas where the US must be able to project power in the protection of its national interests. The strategic direction, therefore, is clear—America’s military must invest in capabilities to operate against adversaries possessing A2/AD capabilities; both the DSG and the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review explicitly state this necessity. This capability is of particular importance to SOF whose area of responsibility is global and whose mission tasking is often a no-fail imperative. To operationalize this guidance, AFSOC “must be able to deeply penetrate into denied and hostile airspace to conduct SOF missions.”⁷⁰

AFSOC's traditional airframes for penetrating enemy airspace in low to medium threat environments have been the MC-130, MH-53, and now the CV-22.⁷¹ The MH-53s are now retired, and the technologies resident in the MC-130 and CV-22 are 20-30 years old.⁷² Even though AFSOC is currently equipping operational squadrons with brand new MC-130J airframes, the delivered aircraft do not possess the penetrating capabilities of even the 22-year old MC-130Hs.⁷³ Meanwhile, the operating environment contains rapidly evolving anti-aircraft threats and the proliferation of high-end weapon systems. A 2005 AFSOC report suggests the command's current airframes "will have survival challenges in the years 2016 and beyond."⁷⁴ The evolving threat picture will result in "an ever-expanding portion of the world where current AFSOC aircraft and aircrews will be unable to complete their mission."⁷⁵ As C-130 derivatives, the MC-130J and the MC-130H have almost identical radar cross sections and fly at the same altitudes and at similar speeds thereby making their vulnerability to radar systems dependent upon their jamming suites. Alternatively, stealth systems leveraging low observable (LO) technologies are a better option to decrease the vulnerability of AFSOC's penetrating aircraft.

In a 2005 article published in *Air & Space Power Journal*, Colonel (Ret) William Saier asserts, "AFSOC needs a new LO aircraft to remain relevant in the future."⁷⁶ He concludes that such an aircraft "is a 'must have' to counter a future adversary's antiaccess and area-denial strategies."⁷⁷ Negotiating the A2/AD dilemma is perhaps the most significant implication AFSOC must consider as it charts its course forward. The next section will examine how AFSOC has postured itself so far to deal with that A2/AD challenge as well as the four other implications presented.

AFSOC's Way Ahead

This section examines how AFSOC currently plans to address the implications previously presented. The author's investigation included review of command briefings and the conduct of telephone interviews and e-mail exchanges with members of the AFSOC staff. Lieutenant General Fiel presented a revised version of AFSOC's Way Ahead briefing in mid-December 2012; the briefing is significant in that it captures the command's priorities and illustrates their link to the DSG. AFSOC's Way Ahead reinforces the commander's vision, presents a common sight picture for staff, and describes current initiatives and future priorities. Lieutenant General Fiel's vision for AFSOC consists of four parts: win the current fight; expand the global SOF network; preserve the force and families; and responsive resourcing.⁷⁸ To achieve this vision, he advances three primary objectives: restructure AFSOF; improve platform capabilities; and increase forward presence.⁷⁹

Restructure AFSOF

AFSOC's first objective involves preserving the force, simplifying operational command and control, and building a "pure fleet" of primary airframes.⁸⁰ In a parallel effort to USSOCOM's Pressure on the Force initiative, Lieutenant General Fiel took proactive efforts to increase the resiliency of his Airmen. He drove the allocation of helpful resources down to lower echelons of command in an attempt to increase readiness, boost effectiveness, and improve retention. AFSOC Airmen now have access to chaplains, medical professionals, and social workers at the group or squadron level. This ongoing effort builds resilience for today's warriors and puts an effective structure in place to meet future stress on the force challenges.

To meet future fiscal challenges, AFSOC is pursuing the acquisition of a pure fleet of primary aircraft platforms. Maintenance commonalities and training synergies associated with pure fleets produce operational efficiencies that should result in savings during leaner budgetary years ahead. This initiative also modernizes the current fleet of aircraft thereby improving overall sustainability. The flagship of this program is the C-130J; using the C-130J as a basic airframe, the command will reduce the number of C-130 variants from eight to three.⁸¹ This ongoing recapitalization and repurposing program will reduce the number of overall airframe types in the command from 15 to seven; AFSOC contends its overall capabilities will increase even though it is reducing platform types.⁸²

Improve Platform Capability

In improving capabilities, AFSOC intends to improve the overall lethality, survivability, agility, and adaptability of its air platforms. The Precision Strike Platform (PSP), operationally proven on the AC-130W, will continue to evolve and serve as the configurable baseline for future strike aircraft (such as the AC-130J). The PSP has proven itself both efficient and effective in combat operations over Afghanistan. Similarly, AFSOC will reconfigure its Air National Guard EC-130J Commando Solo aircraft to improve agility and adaptability. Current equipment will be de-modified and replaced with flexible configurations—roll on/roll off packages tailored for Military Information Support Operations.⁸³ Furthermore, AFSOC will make its SOF mobility assets more adaptable and agile through hardware commonalities and software specialization. Currently, specific missions are associated with specific airframes; in the future, airframes will be common with specialization occurring through the software programming of mission equipment interfaces. AFSOC will accomplish these initiatives

through the application of existing technologies; additionally, the command will pursue advanced technologies through the acquisition of the next generation mobility aircraft.

AFSOC's Way Ahead briefing concludes by stressing the importance of investing in the future and pursuing "the next Magic."⁸⁴ Part of the call for future investment involves the needed development and acquisition of a next generation SOF mobility aircraft. The distinguishing requirement for this new aircraft is low observable (LO) technology (in other words, it must be stealthy). AFSOC finished a "M-X Analysis of Alternatives" study in early 2005 from which it concluded that a "high-speed, long-range air mobility platform capable of performing clandestine missions in denied, politically sensitive, or hostile airspace" was required to "support and improve SOF rapid mobility beyond 2015". The study advocated the development of an aircraft that would "be designed to defeat sophisticated integrated air defense systems with low-observable/stealth design technology."⁸⁵ While the urgency of the project seems to have stalled, AFSOC is still pursuing development of this next generation SOF mobility platform as part of its Way Ahead. The capabilities of this aircraft are critical to building the command's capacity to operate in an A2/AD environment as called for by the DSG.

Increase Forward Presence

AFSOC clearly aligned its objective to increase forward presence with the DSG. The command's plan appears to be multi-faceted. Major efforts include enhancing regional expertise and expanding the overseas groups to achieve a more persistent presence.⁸⁶

AFSOC's initiative to enhance regional expertise revolves around the creation of the Air Force Special Operations Air Warfare Center (AFSOAWC). Architects of the center grounded its operational concept in the Special Air Warfare Center (SAWC) that

General Curtis Lemay established at Eglin Air Force Base, Florida, in 1962.⁸⁷ According to a 1985 article in *Air and Space Power Journal*, the mission of the SAWC was to “train and develop foreign air forces through short term assignments overseas”; its proscribed activities included “supporting, instructing, and advising friendly foreign forces.”⁸⁸ More recently, the Air Force Special Operations Training Center (AFSOTC) and its US Air Force Special Operations School (USAFSOS) at Hurlburt Field continued the legacy of the SAWC to a limited degree. In executing their missions, the two organizations trained and educated Airmen in subject areas including cultural/geopolitical regional orientation, foreign language specialization, and irregular warfare.⁸⁹

The activation of the AFSOAWC in February 2013 better organizes irregular warfare activities within AFSOC.⁹⁰ The new center incorporates the 6th SOS and its AvFID mission. The anticipated result is for AFSOC units to more effectively train for and execute BPC missions. The AFSOAWC will train airmen to perform advisory roles in competencies including air mobility, ISR/strike, medical, joint terminal air control, maintenance, logistics, force protection, communications, survival, and civil engineering. The AFSOAWC will package forces of advisors and present enhanced BPC capabilities to the regional GCCs.⁹¹ This reorganization (to include changes in mission, equipment, and personnel) will also increase the SOF intra-theater airlift capacity thereby allowing future AvFID detachments to better support joint partners in the field. The result should be a more focused, more persistent forward presence to support the indirect approach.

In addition to this indirect approach, AFSOC plans to increase forward presence through changes in its global force lay down as well. Each of AFSOC’s two overseas groups is composed of two MC-130 SOF mobility squadrons, a special tactics

squadron, and maintenance and support units. AFSOC's Way Ahead proposes increasing the size of these overseas organizations by attaching ISR (U-28), strike (AC-130), and light fixed wing intra-theater airlift units.⁹² This expansion will create two overseas special operations wings resulting in GCCs having better access to and control over AFSoF resources. Increased forward presence is a critical element in operationalizing the DSG.

Recommendations and Conclusion

A purpose of this paper was to highlight areas where AFSOC's posture is misaligned with the demands of the DSG. Through the process of reviewing the DSG, identifying its associated implications, and then comparing those implications with AFSOC's Way Ahead, it became evident that AFSOC possesses a commendable degree of organizational agility; however, two opportunities emerge for the command to better align itself with America's new strategic direction. This paper concludes by recommending that AFSOC should increase rotational force deployments to the Asia-Pacific and accelerate development and acquisition of the next generation SoF mobility aircraft.

Increase Force Deployments to the Asia-Pacific

The need for increased forward presence, as called for in the DSG, suggests AFSOC should build additional relationships in the Asia-Pacific region. The command should accelerate the delivery of its new tilt rotor aircraft, the CV-22, to Kadena Air Base, Japan. While the approval of long-term basing agreements and substantial infrastructure improvements can be both costly and time-consuming, AFSOC should work with USPACOM and USSOCOM in securing approval for shorter-term deployments of the Osprey to the Pacific theater. Rotational deployments should be

established in much the same way the USAF is presenting its newest fighter technology, the F-22 Raptor, to the region—through a series of expeditionary deployments to Guam and Kadena. Such expeditionary force deployments to the Asia-Pacific region should include strike and ISR assets such as the AC-130 and U-28. This deployed framework will provide the agility and flexibility that longer-term basing agreements cannot; more importantly, it will spread AFSOF's presence throughout the theater substantially quicker. While admittedly increasing the command's operations tempo, expeditionary deployments to the Asia-Pacific will enhance AFSOF's posture in the region and increase its readiness to respond to contingency events. In order to be truly ready to respond to the spectrum of contingency events in the Asia-Pacific, however, AFSOF will require substantial hardware and software investments.

Accelerate the Next Generation SOF Mobility Aircraft

Even though the DSG clearly identifies the need to operate within an A2/AD environment, AFSOF currently lacks the stand-alone capability to do so. Today's SOF aircraft require a prohibitively large formation of support aircraft to operate within an A2/AD environment. AFSOC's own study highlighted this predicament concluding that AFSOF will be ill prepared to conduct operations in hostile airspace "beyond 2015."⁹³ It is 2013 and the command has no program in place to put a next generation aircraft on the ramp prior to 2016. If AFSOC's own forecasting is correct, the command might be facing an impending and disturbing capability gap. For this reason, AFSOC must accelerate the development and acquisition of the next generation SOF air mobility platform. America critically needs its capabilities to pull off SOF national missions of strategic importance with requisite speed and surprise. In the meantime, AFSOC should

make defensive improvements to the newly acquired MC-130J aircraft so it will be more survivable against the higher-end threats resident in the Asia-Pacific region.

Conclusion

AFSOC's challenge over the past year involved aligning itself with the strategic direction created by the DSG. The command's ongoing challenge is considerable given America's strategic focus can quickly change (as the epigraph illustrated). Effective implementation of defense strategic guidance in volatile times requires organizational agility. In the year following the release of the DSG, AFSOC demonstrated admirable agility in posturing to meet both present and future strategic challenges. This dual focus will continue as the command remains heavily employed underwriting the drawdown of conventional forces from Afghanistan in 2014. While America's conventional forces reset following a decade of combat and rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific, AFSOF will serve an important role in hedging against existing and emerging threats in other parts of the world. AFSOC (people and equipment) will likely serve a strategic reserve function as an agile, adaptable, flexible, lethal, and mobile force to confront America's unforeseen strategic challenges. In preparation for this role, AFSOC forged a force that retains formidable capabilities even during lean times. AFSOC addressed most of the specific challenges presented by the DSG. Indeed, under Lieutenant General Fiel's leadership, the command displayed enviable organizational agility in bolstering AFSOF's contribution to *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership* in the 21st century.

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